



Dirty Jobs

by L.J. Sellers

Eddie was never early for anything, but the one time it happened turned into a disaster. He'd finished his first job in a quick fifteen minutes, finding the rotting raccoon about five feet from where he dropped into the crawl space. Damn good thing too, because the putrid smell made his eyes water and his throat close up. He scooped the mushy carcass into a thick plastic bag, crawled out of the darkness, and collected a cash payment from a pleased Mrs. Hornby. Eddie loved it when clients paid him in cash, earnings he didn't have to claim on his tax return.

His second job turned out to be only a mile away. He pulled into the Gormans' driveway, knowing his appointment was not for another forty minutes, but thinking if he worked quickly, he'd be home in time to catch Rachel Ray's cooking show. He was between girlfriends, and Ms. Ray was the bright spot in his life right now.

Mrs. Gorman's sedan was in the driveway, so she was home and would probably be happy to see him show up early for a change. Eddie trotted up the flagstone path to the double glass doors, knocked twice, and got no answer. Darla, as she liked to be called, was probably out back, enjoying the last days of summer by the pool.

He grabbed his tool bag and ladder and headed for the rear of the house. The gutters under the oak tree on the south corner were always clogged the worst, and it would make the lady of the house happy to see him start there.

As he rounded the corner into the lush back yard, he saw a figure in dark clothes. The tall, red-haired man was holding a window screen. A half-second later, he dropped the screen and climbed in through the master bedroom window.

What the hell?

Eddie dropped the ladder and trotted toward the patio. Was the guy a burglar? Eddie patted his pockets as he ran, checking for his cell phone. Crap. He'd left it in the van. As he neared the wide, low-slung glass, a small scream made his heart race.

Darla was in danger!

Eddie fumbled in his tool bag, grasping for something he could use as a weapon. His fingers curled around a handle and he let the tool bag fall to the ground.

With courage he didn't know he possessed, Eddie hurled himself through the window opening. He caught the edge of a potted plant and lurched to the floor, twisting his ankle as he landed. Sharp pain radiated into his foot. Eddie bit his tongue to keep from crying out.

The intruder had tiny Darla pinned against the wall between the walk-in closet and the unmade king-sized bed. A huge hand pressed against her mouth as the other ripped at her white summer blouse.

"No!" Her shout was muffled under the pressure of his palm. The man pulled back and slapped her. Darla let out a soft cry. He clamped down on her mouth again, then yanked a gun from his jacket pocket. He leaned in and pressed the tip of the barrel to the blond woman's cheek. "Be quiet or I'll hurt you," he threatened, his voice giving Eddie a chill.

For a moment, Eddie froze. He hated guns. Even in his former life as small-time thief, he had avoided thugs with weapons. But there was no going back out the window without being noticed. If he just stood there, he'd likely get killed.

The man shifted his weight and started to turn. Eddie made his move.

He charged, head down, like he'd done in high school as a second-string football player. He hit the assailant

from the side, driving his head into the larger man's shoulder. He knocked him against a tallboy dresser, and the guy fell to the thick white carpet.

Eddie kept charging. Behind him Darla screamed louder.

Eddie landed on the man's chest, pinning him to the floor in a straddle. He pulled back to strike a blow as the man's handsome face crumpled in shock. Eddie brought the trowel down with all the strength his wiry body could muster and plunged it into the attacker's eye. The man let out a fierce scream.

The cry cut off by an odd gurgling sound. Behind him, Darla yelled, "No, no, no." Then the man's head rolled to the side as blood poured from his eye.

"Oh my God. What have you done?" Darla pounded Eddie's shoulders with her fists and sobbed furiously. "Is he dead? Oh my God."

Confused, Eddie struggled to his feet. "He could have killed you."

Darla grabbed a t-shirt from a chair by the bed and kneeled down next to the man. She pressed the shirt to his eye. "You have to take him to the hospital!"

Eddie didn't understand.

"He's my lover, you idiot."

Eddie noticed for the first time Darla's blouse was see-through and her skirt just covered her ass. Oh sweet Jesus. "He had a gun in your face." Eddie's head pounded with confusion.

“It’s part of the game. I like guns.” Darla’s makeup had smeared around her eyes, but her voice was now under control. “Stop talking and help me get him into your van. He needs to get to the ER.”

Eddie thought it might be too late for that. “Call an ambulance.” He stepped toward the window where he’d come in. “I’m sorry. I meant to help you, but I can’t be involved.”

Panic flashed through Darla’s eyes, then the control was back. “I can’t call 911 or the police. My husband will kill me if he finds out I’ve been cheating on him. You have to help me.” She kept pressure on the man’s wound while she pleaded. “I’ll pay you. Just get him to the hospital.”

Eddie calculated how much she thought the favor was worth. Five hundred? A thousand? He knew a different kind of man, who had lived a different kind of life, would simply call the police, despite her pleas and bribes. But Eddie had learned from an early age that to survive, you had to figure all the angles and play the one that worked to your advantage.

“I want a thousand dollars. Cash.”

Darla hesitated. “I don’t know.”

Eddie gave her a look. “You’ll find a way.”

He tried to visualize how he would get the big limp man from here to his van. “Have you got some medical tape? Or something to tie that t-shirt down with? You don’t want blood all over your white carpet.”

Darla scurried into the hallway. Eddie slipped his hand into the man's back pocket, eased out his wallet, and deftly removed a small wad of bills. He slid the wallet back without looking at the guy's ID. It was best not to know. He shoved the cash into his jeans, then noticed the man's gun had fallen to the floor. Eddie swore long and loud. What should he do with the damn thing? Darla would not want the weapon left in her house, and Eddie couldn't bear to have it in his possession. Not even long enough to sell it for cash. His heart pounded just looking at it.

Carefully, touching only the butt of handle, he picked up the small black gun and slipped it into the wounded man's jacket pocket. It was his piece; he should have to do the explaining.

Eddie pondered his next move. Could he haul this guy all the way to the van? He didn't expect spoiled, skinny Darla to be much help.

Across the shoulders in a fireman's carry, he decided.

Darla rushed into the room, tearing open a package. She handed him a wide elastic bandage, the kind people usually wrapped around their knee. As she swaddled the man's head, he let out a moan. Eddie heaved a sigh of relief. He'd never killed anyone, and he didn't want that on his conscience. He had enough to feel bad about.

Getting the limp weight up on his shoulders was awkward, but the adrenaline pounding in his veins gave Eddie the strength he needed.

“Take him out through the garage,” Darla instructed. “I don’t want my neighbors to see this.”

“Then get the garage door open for me, and the rear doors on my van too,” Eddie barked back. He was doing her a favor; she could be a little nicer about it. Still, her plan made sense. If he moved straight from the garage to the back of his van, it was unlikely anyone would see him carrying the guy. The house was on a steep rise from the road, and dense shrubbery separated the Gormans from their neighbors.

Eddie followed Darla down the hall, through the massive kitchen, and into the three-car garage. The middle overhead door stood open, and in the driveway Darla struggled to get the back doors of his van open.

“Pull up on the handle,” he said, trying to be heard without actually shouting.

The man’s weight pinched Eddie’s lower back, which had been messed up since his last year in the Army. His ankle still hurt too. *Hurry up, you ditzy blond.* Until today, he’d thought of Darla as classy and kind. Instead, she was a cheat and a freak and now he was paying for it.

She finally got the van open and Eddie charged for the vehicle. He unloaded the man on top of some vinyl flooring he’d pulled up last week and hadn’t dumped yet.

Jesus. Eddie’s back was relieved but still unhappy.

“Take him to the downtown hospital. It’s closest.” Darla moved back into the garage, chewing her thumbnail as she retreated.

Eddie slammed the doors shut, jumped in the front, and gunned it down the driveway.

What would he say at the hospital? *I found him like this?* If he wanted to get paid, he couldn't mention Darla or her little game. Eddie decided it was best to just drop the guy and go. Could he get away with that?

Oh crap. How had he gotten into this mess? He'd been doing so well. Even his parole officer said so. He turned left at the street, then eased off the gas. It would be disastrous to get stopped by a cop.

And yet, a moment later, he did. The blue cruiser gunned up the hill, heading his direction. Lights flashed, signaling Eddie to pull over. His heart somersaulted and landed in his throat. Crap on a stick!

He pulled off into a little wooded turnout, and the squad car swung in behind him.

Stay calm, he coached himself, as the cop stood behind the van, noting his license plate number. No reason to panic. He was probably just missing a taillight or some stupid little thing.

The cop strode up to the window, one hand touching the weapon at his side.

"License and registration." The officer had a nice-looking face, except for the dark circles under his eyes. Eddie noticed the cop's thick midsection and decided he could outrun him, easy.

Eddie fumbled in the glove box for the paperwork, then passed it through the window. "Why did you stop me?" His voice sounded squeaky.

The cop scrutinized his driver's license. "Eddie Lucas. What were you doing at that house? You don't live there."

"Some maintenance work. Cleaning gutters mostly."

"Bullshit. Try again."

"It's the truth. I run my own business. It's called Dirty Jobs."

"Let's see your hands."

Eddie held them out through the window. What the hell was this about? Did the cop think he'd robbed Darla's house?

"Hmm." The cop scowled. "Let's look in the back and see if you have any handyman tools."

Eddie's gut felt like a snake was suddenly passing through. He reached for the passenger's seat, where he always kept his tool bag. It wasn't there. "I've got another job to go to," he stammered. "I'm a working man."

The cop was already headed to the back of the van, where he peered into the round porthole on the side.

"What have we got here?"

In a flash, Eddie saw the next five minutes play out in his head. The cop would draw his gun, call for back up, and force Eddie out of the van and to the ground. With a knee pressed into his back, the cop would cuff him, shove him in the back of the cruiser, and book him into the county jail.

It didn't happen like that. Eddie watched over his shoulder as the cop opened the back doors, peeled away

the bloody t-shirt a little, and stared at the wounded man's face. The cop's mouth tightened into a thin line and he nodded to himself. Then he checked for a pulse and nodded again.

When he came around to Eddie's window, he said, "You were at that house to clean the gutters, then what happened?"

Eddie told his story, omitting the part where he took the wounded man's money. He felt bad for Darla, but what else could he do? This cop had seen him pull out of her driveway. There was no way to keep her out of this and no way to explain his assault on the guy without mentioning the weird phony rape scenario.

"She said it was a game they played, huh?" The cop's expression was hard to read. Eddie thought he saw a flash of pain, but then it was gone.

"It looked so real. He had a gun. I thought we would both be killed."

"Where's the gun?"

"In his jacket pocket." Eddie squirmed. "We need to get this guy to a hospital. He's bleeding pretty badly."

"Do you know who he is?" the cop asked, seeming unconcerned about the blood.

"No."

"I'll take him. You can go." Before Eddie could respond, the cop trotted away, hauled the wounded man out, and loaded him into the backseat of his squad car. Eddie sat, stunned, watching in his rearview mirror. Finally, the officer waved him on.

Eddie started the engine and eased onto the road. His legs shook and his heart raced. Was he really going to drive away from this? Cops never believed him, even when he told the truth. Eddie could feel a grin take over his face. What a lucky break. What a strange cop. For a moment, he felt guilty about stealing the money. Then he remembered he hadn't been paid for the work at Darla's, and she wasn't likely to cough up the grand when she found out he'd told a cop about her fun and games. He would still be home in time to watch Rachel Ray though.

At the bottom of the hill, his cell phone rang.

"Eddie, it's Darla. We didn't talk about this, but you can't mention my name at the hospital either. They file police reports. It's imperative the police never hear about this."

Eddie chewed the inside of his lip. Should he tell her? "What are you so worried about?" he said finally. "How is your husband going to find out just because the police know? They don't share much information with the public."

"My husband is a cop, and he's extremely jealous. He'd kill me and my lover if he ever found I'd cheated on him."

Eddie started to speak, then stopped and hung up. He was done with this mess. He'd tried to save a woman in danger. He'd tried to take the man to the hospital. He'd cooperated with the police. He'd been a good citizen today. His mother would be proud.

He shut off the cell phone, so he wouldn't hear it ring when Darla called back. He tried to focus on the rest of his day. A little TV, maybe a nap, then make something nice for dinner. But the questions kept playing in his head. Had Officer Gorman been watching his own house because he didn't trust his wife? Would he kill her lover who was now captive in the back of his car? Would Gorman go home and kill Darla?

Eddie turned on the radio to drown out his thoughts, but they were good swimmers and kept coming to the surface. Finally, he grabbed his phone and called Darla back.

It rang seven times, then went to voicemail. Eddie didn't leave a message.

Officer Gorman had watched Eddie drive away and thought, *He's not too bright. If they ever find the bodies, framing him will be easy.*